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Charlotte Brontë's Gothic Fragment: 'The Story of Willie Ellin'

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë's eighteen-page fragment, 'The Story of Willie Ellin', written shortly after the publication of *Villette* in 1853, combines the gothic and realism and uses multiple narrators to tell a disturbing story of cruelty towards a child. The generic instability and disordered temporal framework of this fragment make it unlike anything Brontë had previously written, yet it has attracted the attention of few scholars. Those who have discussed it have condemned it as a failure; the later fragment 'Emma', also left incomplete by the author's premature death, has been seen as the more likely beginning of a successor to *Villette*. 'The Story of Willie Ellin' reveals Brontë at her most experimental as she explores the use of different narrative voices, including that of an unnamed genderless 'ghost', to tell a story from different perspectives. It also shows Brontë representing a child's experience of extreme physical abuse which goes far beyond the depictions of chastisement in *Jane Eyre* (1847). This essay argues that 'The Story of Willie Ellin' affords rich insights into Brontë's ideas and working practices in her final years, suggesting that it should be more widely acknowledged as a unique aspect of Brontë's oeuvre, revealing the new directions she may have taken had she lived to complete another novel.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë, child abuse, ghosts, gothic, literary fragments, 'The Story of Willie Ellin'

Introduction

In May 1853, shortly after the publication of *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë began to write 'The Story of Willie Ellin', an eighteen-page fragment divided into five parts, one of them depicting disturbing scenes of cruelty towards a small boy and another employing a ghost as the narrator. By the end of June she appeared to abandon this story, beginning work a few months later on the less experimental 'Emma', which has been considered the likely successor to *Villette*, 'a typically Brontëan piece' set in a girls' school (Tomaiuolo 198). Brontë's marriage in 1854 and her death at the age of thirty-eight in the following year meant that neither 'Willie Ellin' nor 'Emma' were developed beyond their initial chapters. Both fragments were written at an unusually eventful period in Brontë's life, when she made memorable visits to London and Manchester and experienced disruption at home following an initially unwelcome proposal of marriage from her father's curate, which enraged Patrick Brontë. 'Willie Ellin' thus emerged at a troubled time, and Juliet Barker has seen the circumstances surrounding its composition as the reason for the story's 'failure', stating that it 'did not progress as it should' (Barker 734). However, 'Willie Ellin' is arguably the most experimental piece of writing Brontë produced as an adult, for not only did she test out new narrative styles involving temporal shifts and multiple narrators, but she also dealt with the controversial topic of extreme physical cruelty inflicted by an adult on a child. Brontë's juvenilia had contained depictions of child torture, but these were presented in the fantastic magical world of Angria, the cruelty often perpetrated by Pigtail,

a giant who kills and sells children for his own amusement.[1] Her representation of the mistreatment of the child Jane in *Jane Eyre* is mild in comparison to the representations of violence in the later fragment. 'Willie Ellin' works in a different register from Brontë's earlier novels, moving unevenly between realism and the gothic, presenting multiple points of view within a shifting narrative structure. In this essay I will assess the significance of 'The Story of Willie Ellin', arguing that the fragment can be seen as a relic of an experimental phase of Brontë's development as a writer, revealing some possible new directions she may have taken had she lived to complete another novel.

Despite the rich insights it affords into Brontë's ideas and working practices, 'Willie Ellin' has been largely overlooked by scholars; when it is mentioned at all, it has usually been dismissed as a negligible part of her oeuvre. Tom Winnifrith, for example, has considered it 'an unsatisfactory recompense' for the period between *Villette*'s completion and the author's premature death (x). Similarly, Claire Harman states that '[w]ith all the time in the world to be writing, Charlotte was doing very little' after the publication of *Villette* (328). Barker suggests that Brontë abandoned it because of a 'fear [that] the critics would not take kindly to Edward Ellin [the abuser], another "vulgar" and "profane" creation from the pen of "Currer Bell"' (734). The textual fragments left behind by authors on their deaths are frequently dismissed when they appear to deviate from the author's usual style and themes. In her study of Jane Austen's fragments, Kathryn Sutherland notes that some scholars have been puzzled about 'how to account for unseemliness' in the unfinished work she left behind (203). Rather than dismiss these incomplete texts as insignificant, Sutherland suggests that readers should approach them as 'frail survivors' indicative of potentially new directions in an author's work, 'trace[s of] what might have been' had the author lived to develop them (203). Austen, Sutherland explains, was 'an inveterate and accomplished recycler – of stories, themes, and the most minor details' (196), and because of this it is possible to trace connections between her

fragments and the finished works, for the former are not so much 'a structure aborted than […] a kind of test ground' (198–9). 'Willie Ellin' functions in a similar way, for rather than being an anomaly, it can be read as a recycling of plots, themes, and characters from Brontë's earlier writings, as well as a 'test ground' for new approaches to her craft, revealing her willingness to experiment with radically new narrative strategies at a relatively late stage of her career.

1853: a 'period of turmoil'

Charlotte Brontë's desire to experiment with new literary styles emerged at a particularly stimulating period of her life. In January 1853 she stayed in London with the mother of her publisher George Smith, ostensibly to work on the proofs of *Villette*. During this visit, at her own request, she made excursions to institutions associated with the darker side of the capital, in order to examine 'the real than the decorative side of Life' (*Letters* 108; original emphasis). She gained admittance to Bethlehem Hospital, Newgate Prison and the Foundling Hospital, where she briefly encountered the lives of mentally ill patients, prisoners, and abandoned children. In Newgate, according to George Smith, who accompanied her, she attempted to speak with, and touch, a young female prisoner convicted of infanticide, until a warder intervened to say that Brontë was breaking the rules (see *Letters* 109, n.3 and Gordon 329). Her unprecedented visits to these institutions for unfortunates suggest that Brontë may have been exploring new directions for her next novel; indeed, the issue of child abuse raised in 'Willie Ellin' certainly supports this idea.

The visit to the Smith's home had been a welcome one, for in December 1852 Arthur Bell Nicholls had made his unexpected proposal, and even though Charlotte initially rejected him, his persistence and overtly emotional response so angered Patrick Brontë that his relationship with his curate became untenable. A second welcome escape from these domestic tensions came in the form of an invitation from Elizabeth Gaskell to visit her at her home at

Plymouth Grove in Manchester in April 1853, a visit which Brontë was later to proclaim as 'the very brightest and healthiest I have known these five years past' (qtd in Barker 728), a reference to a lifting of the depression she had suffered following the deaths of her siblings, Emily, Anne, and Branwell, in 1848 and 1849. Nevertheless, her stay in the busy, cheerful home of the Gaskells was disrupted at one point by a letter from her close friend Ellen Nussey in which she mentioned that she had decided to stay with the Reverend Francis Upjohn and his wife in Suffolk. The Upjohns were considering 'adopting' Ellen and making her their heiress, but the 'strange unhappy' couple imposed odd conditions which were not in Ellen's interests (*Letters* 175). Additionally, Ellen was fearful of visiting them because she had heard their house was haunted. The story of the ghost, which Ellen related in her letter (now lost), 'so preyed on Charlotte's mind that she spent a sleepless night' at Gaskell's house (Barker 726). The nature of the ghost story is not recorded, yet it was clearly disturbing and Brontë wrote to Ellen on 6 April to warn her 'that there is something very wrong' with the Upjohns and their arrangements (*Letters* 148). On returning home to Haworth in May 1853, Charlotte found that domestic tensions had not abated when she informed Ellen of the unhappy Nicholls being wracked by 'a paroxysm of anguish' (*Letters* 168), and heard her father declaring that his departing curate was an 'unmanly driveller' (*Letters* 166). Vacillating between her growing inclination to accept Nicholls and her wish to appease her father, Brontë decided at this juncture to begin work on 'The Story of Willie Ellin'.

I speculate that this fragment is the creative result of some of the unusual experiences Brontë faced in 1853. The story deals with the issues of child cruelty and neglect, suggesting that the visits to Newgate and the Foundling Hospital prompted a reflection on these themes; the story also includes a section narrated by a spirit and it is likely that Ellen Nussey's disturbing ghost story and her vulnerable situation in the Upjohns's 'haunted' home inspired this aspect of the narrative. Indeed, the similarities between the names 'Ellen' and 'Ellin' are

suggestive. The emotional intensity of this strange fragment possibly originated in the author witnessing her suitor's tears and father's fury, while simultaneously struggling to cope with her own complex feelings and loyalties. The visit to London in January came not long after the publication of Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850), which she admired, and *Bleak House* (1852-3), both of which represent vulnerable children adrift in London's streets. 'Willie Ellin', like *David Copperfield*, depicts an abused child making a long journey on foot from the town to the country to seek refuge with a kind elderly female. Additionally, Brontë's stay in Manchester, known at this time as 'Cottonopolis', must have exposed her to the sight of children working in the ubiquitous cotton mills, possibly reminding her of accounts of the exploitation of and cruelty towards child mill workers which had dominated press reports during her youth in the 1820s and 1830s.[2] As a child, Willie Ellin seeks to escape bondage in the industrial town of Golpit, a place associated with enforced labour, social humiliation and the violence inflicted by Edward, his half-brother.

'The Story of Willie Ellin': An experiment in recycling

'Willie Ellin' is intriguing for its combination of old themes and characters with new plot devices and narrative styles, as well as possessing the poignancy of being one of the last fictional texts Charlotte Brontë wrote before her death. While some critics have presumed she would ultimately combine 'Willie Ellin' and 'Emma' into one novel (Tomaiuolo 199; Gordon 330), each fragment is very different from the other. 'Willie Ellin' depicts extreme violence and gothic spaces; 'Emma', by contrast, is written in a consistently realist register with a satirical edge and continues Brontë's interest in representing school life, a key feature of her previous novel *Villette*. 'Emma' was published posthumously in April 1860 in the popular *Cornhill Magazine* under the title 'The Last Sketch: *Emma*', with an introduction by the magazine's editor, W. M. Thackeray. By contrast, 'Willie Ellin' was not published in full until 1936, receiving comparatively little exposure in the Brontë Society's own journal, *Brontë*

Society Transactions; although parts of the story had been published in the magazine *The Woman at Home* in 1898. These sections had been taken from the original manuscript which had been on display in the Brontë Museum in 1897, loaned by its owner H. T. Butler (Brontë 1936, 3). The anonymous editor of the 1936 publication claims that the first three parts 'evidently represent three entirely separate attempts to start the same story', an assumption which may not be the case, for it is equally possible that Brontë intended to tell one story from different viewpoints, as Dickens had in *Bleak House* (Brontë, 'Willie' 3). Superficially, 'Willie Ellin' reads as a return to the theme of brotherly conflict in the then unpublished *The Professor*. This novel was written in 1846 but was repeatedly rejected by publishers. It was first published in 1857, two years after Brontë's death. However, the fragment does not really cover the same ground as the earlier novel for the brothers in the later story have a greater age difference, Willie being a young child and Edward a grown man, and there are none of the depictions of school life which dominated the completed novel.

Even if Brontë had decided not to complete 'Willie Ellin', this gothic fragment is interesting as an experimental piece that explores innovative narrative styles and reworks old themes in new ways. It is less a story than a series of loosely connected sketches, which may be one reason why so few scholars have considered it significant or worthy of attention. The text has certainly suffered more neglect than most of Brontë's fragments, perhaps because it does not conform to conceptions of the author's usual style and each of its five short parts (and the whole story is a little less than six thousand words) appears to lack overall coherence, offering neither a stable form nor consistent narrative voice.[3] Yet it is this inherent instability that reveals Brontë's working methods as she tested out new ideas and techniques. Both Winnifrith and Harman suggest that the lack of coherence in 'Willie Ellin' is a sign of her losing direction after *Villette*; however, Brontë's use of different narrative voices and perspectives reveals her thinking about ways of challenging some of the conventions of mid-

Victorian realism. Whether her experiment would have resulted in a successful full-length novel is impossible to know; nevertheless, the fragment shows us that far from 'doing very little' in 1853, Charlotte Brontë was thinking very carefully about uncharted territories of narrative style, as well as exploring how the gothic genre could open up a way for her to shift points of view and temporal structures through the use of multiple narrators, each speaking at a different point in non-chronological time.[4]

Gothic influences: ghosts and spirits

'The Story of Willie Ellin', with its combination of realism and the gothic, relates to Brontë's continuing interest in representing ghosts and the ghostly, a subject which became fashionable in the early 1850s (Killeen 124–8). In the same year that 'Willie Ellin' was written *The Spirit World*, a spiritualist magazine, was established to cater for a burgeoning interest in spirit manifestations. Many women writers of the period, including her friend Harriet Martineau, whom she had once persuaded to hypnotise her (Barker 664), were attracted to the concept of the uncanny, finding the ghost story in particular an important 'critical tool' to use when engaging with political issues (Smith 5). According to Dickerson, the genre enabled women writers to express 'their ambiguous status as the "other" living in a state of in-betweenness' (Dickerson 8). Similarly, McDayter argues that 'Gothic fiction created a space for subversive feminine empowerment' (55). In her previous work Brontë had undoubtedly asserted her feminist voice through the powerful language and imagery of the gothic; 'Willie Ellin' by contrast, offered her an opportunity to use the gothic in a different way, as a means to escape the constrictions of gender. In the second part of the story she employs a non-human narrator, a nameless, bodiless, genderless spirit, unlike other literary ghosts in that it never had a previous material existence. This spirit tells the story of its relationship to a house and land, as well as of its disconnection from human life, of which it is only vaguely aware. Alongside this innovative use of the ghost story, Brontë employs conventional gothic imagery in the forms of

a mysterious broken ruin, an ancient burial-ground, and the power of nature, particularly twilight and the moon. The gothic mode is subdued in other parts of the fragment, creating an unusual plaiting together of genres.

Brontë appears to have been 'haunted' by the voices of her dead siblings when she came to write 'The Story of Willie Ellin'. Emily and Anne had been maligned by reviewers for their 'coarseness' (Barker 734) and in 1850 Charlotte had written a Preface to a new edition of their novels in which she defended their work against such accusations. In 'Willie Ellin' she appears to pay homage to their legacy, as though she wishes to align herself with their reputations as controversial authors. Charlotte depicts adult violence against children and represents a female housekeeper as a significant character, both echoes from Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), while the issue of the appropriate care of children when parents or guardians prove to be unsuitable was a central theme in Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). The representation of hatred between brothers, a tyrannous elder brother in trade called Edward who oppresses his younger sibling, called William, looks back to the origins of the story which had obsessed Charlotte throughout her career – Branwell's 'The Wool is Rising' (1834). At one point in 'The Story of Willie Ellin' Charlotte presents the child Willie moving between his bleak and lonely life in Edward's house and the spiritual world of the dead, an idea of connection between the living and the dead which accords with her interest in spiritualism at this time, as well as harking back to the Romantic interest in graveyard writing, with its attempt 'to make the dead more present' to the living (Westover 73).

As I suggested earlier, Dickens's work may have also provided inspiration, perhaps even prompting Charlotte's earlier visits to Newgate and the Foundling Hospital when she stayed in London. In a letter to her publisher George Smith in March 1852 she recorded her response to *Bleak House*, particularly her feelings of disgust with Esther Summerson as a 'weak and twaddling' narrator; however, she liked *Bleak House*'s other narrator, a disembodied third-

person voice narrating in the present tense, suggesting a possible source for her own disengaged spirit-narrator in the second part of 'Willie Ellin' (Brontë, *Letters* 27). Similarly, the novel's haunted Ghost Walk may have reinforced her desire to explore connections between the living and dead, while Dickens's depictions of the street-child Jo the crossing-sweeper may have augmented her interest in representing child suffering. Although conjectures about likely influences are inevitable, there being so many possible stimulants available to her at this time, 'Willie Ellin' is far from being derivative. At times the story reads as an innovative departure from the conventions of mid-Victorian realism, suggesting the intriguing idea that given time, Brontë would have produced a new sort of novel. Unfortunately, time was not available to her, for marriage, pregnancy, and her premature death less than two years later mean that we can only conjecture as to how this fragment may have developed had she continued working on it. Only the fact that it was preserved among her papers, rather than destroyed as a rejected piece, suggests that it may have had significance for her.

'The Story of Willie Ellin': writing at 'the rim of twilight'

'The Story of Willie Ellin' is divided into five parts, with part three being further sub-divided into two sections. Three of the five parts have a different narrator, some of them being distinctly reticent, suggesting that the 'problem of narratability' which dominated *Villette*, continued to be at the forefront of the author's mind (Glen 253). The first part of the story is narrated by Willie as a mature man who has returned to the home of his ancestors, Ellin Hall, after twenty years away. Like Charlotte Brontë herself, he is the 'surviving representative' of a 'flock of four' (WE 4). This section is the shortest part of the fragment and appears to be set at a chronologically later point than the subsequent sections. It focuses on the housekeeper, Mrs Widdup, who first took care of the four children thirty years earlier. Willie reveals that the return to the home of his youth was brought about by the premature death of his elder half-brother who, a 'tyrant in heart' (5), had sold the family home when he went into business. On

inheriting his half-brother's fortune, Willie has 'purchased back the ancient homestead' (5), largely because he has a strong sense of family tradition and belonging to his ancestral home and its land. The first part ends with the ominous statement, 'I would advert to his [Edward's] deeds, but they are such as we suffer Death to cancel from memory' (5). However, we later discover in the fourth and fifth parts of the story that a third-person narrator does 'advert to deeds' of cruelty, describing in detail how Edward inflicts extreme violence on his ten-year-old half-brother.

The second part of 'Willie Ellin' employs a different narrative voice, that of the nameless spirit. It opens with a challenge to the traditional concepts of property and ownership by suggesting that spirits are able to take 'secret' possession of 'human dwellings', a more genuine form of ownership than that encompassed by property laws. Yet human owners are largely oblivious of these 'secret' dwellers: 'we were always few, our presence rare, its signs faint, and its proofs difficult to seize' (5). Willie's return to Ellin Hall in part one, is matched with this alternative ghostly form of possession in part two, where the spirit feels a mysterious 'attraction' to Ellin Balcony (which is presumably the same dwelling under a slightly different name). The human inhabitants of Ellin Balcony are here only tenuously linked to the house, which the narrator suggests makes them unworthy owners. What makes this section of the story so intriguing is that the mysterious speaker, like Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, inexplicably refuses to communicate fully with the reader. This reticence is reinforced through a series of questions, presumably raised by the reader, which the narrator answers obliquely, refusing to elaborate on the details:

> Who am I? Was I the owner of the house? No. Was I its resident tenant, taking it perhaps on lease, and paying the rent? No. Was I the child of the family? No. A servant? No. Ask me no more questions for they are difficult to meet. I was there, and it was my house. (6)

The spirit goes on to articulate his own story in a similarly disconcerting and obstructive way. Although he appears superficially ghostly, having risen from an ancient and forgotten burial-ground at Ellin Balcony, he has never previously existed in the identity of a person once alive.[5] The spirit believes that 'one sleeper threw me out of a great labouring heart which had toiled terribly through his thirty, or sixty, or fourscore years of work', emerging when the labourer's heart is 'yet warm and scarce arrested', having 'thrown forth its unslackened glow and ill-checked action in an essence bodiless and incomplete, yet penetrative and subtle' (7). This vague yet powerful language points towards an innovative account of 'ghostliness'.

The narrator infers that 'the inmates of Ellin Balcony […] must have been busy, bustling […], an alert current of life […] circulating in a free ordinary channel', but is unable to interact with them because they devote themselves exclusively to a material existence (7–8). He is scornful that the human builders and owners of the house are oblivious to the fact that Ellin Balcony stands on the site of the 'ancient burying-ground – so ancient that all the sleepers under the flowers had long ago ceased to be either clay or bone, and were become fine mould, throwing out violets in May, and a carpet of close silken grass all spring, summer, and autumn' (6). The violets, nourished by the dead, grow thickest around 'a deep-sunk and iron-grey rock – the sole foundation stone of a forgotten chapel, or the basement of a cross broken away' (6). The house's stone balcony overlooks this ancient site, with its unknown gothic fragment, which serves as an analogue for this part of the text itself — a gothic fragment embedded within a largely realist text. States of betweenness and incompleteness are signalled by the narrator's 'birth': 'I came to consciousness at a moment within the rim of twilight', coming 'upward out of earth – not downward from heaven, […] aided to life' by the moon, 'a globule, clear, cragged, and desolate'; the night is his 'mother' (6).

This unnamed spirit of the place is attracted to land with melancholy associations, for '[t]ears had watered [the] ground' and 'great sorrows and feelings had gathered here'; indeed

only land associated with strong emotion could 'have yielded [him] as its produce' (7). Melancholy and strong emotion colour a narrative of negatives, a refusal to explain; for example, it is not stated why the house is important to the spirit, and only a negative view of its exterior is presented: 'My house was not picturesque: it had no turrets, no battlements, no mullioned or lozenged windows. [….] [I]ts stones were grey, dug from a grey quarry on a grey waste' (5). This resembles the negative tone used by the adult Willie in part one, when he describes himself as *not* a favourite of Mrs Widdup, his place being 'lowest in her grace' (4). Willie and the mysterious spirit also share a sense of separation and isolation: the spirit could not 'knit with humanity', the first inhabitants of Ellin Balcony 'made no impression' on him (7). When the 'bustling' human inhabitants move away to live in town, the spirit records 'a new holiday feeling of unconstraint' and a sudden awareness of the unnamed remaining inhabitant, a 'solitary old woman' who acts as housekeeper (8). Because she is reflective and intelligent the spirit is able 'to perceive her presence. Those who had lived here before her never thought, and into an existence all material I could not enter' (8). The connecting thread between parts one and two is a material object, the house, evoking strong emotions which both the spirit and Willie appear to possess genuinely (rather than casually). This strong sense of place, along with the dislocations in time suggested in the fragment, show Brontë developing themes and narrative structures unlike any she had employed in her previous novels.

The strange and 'penetrating' energy (7) which creates the spirit is not, then, the ghost of the labourer buried long ago; indeed, the narrator bears no resemblance to the usual run of literary ghosts. The spirit-narrator does not even share an identity with the vaguely imagined labourer, instead originating in a mysterious 'glow' sent out from the man's dying heart. Killeen has suggested that the Victorian literary ghost 'represents a breach in historical progression […] a manifestation of "the past in the present"', as well as being linked to family life, 'involving mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, and personal transgression that has been

repressed, shut away' (129). The 'ghost' of 'Willie Ellin' does not conform to this model in any straightforward way, for the spirit is strangely unconnected to, and at first unaware of, human life, apart from his speculation that he was created from the unspecified 'glow' of a failing heart. Such a narrator allows Brontë an opportunity to use the gothic to escape the representation of human ties and gender identity completely; nevertheless she also employs some of the conventions of gothic fiction as indicated by Sedgwick, who considers it a genre 'dealing with repetition, multiple narrators, stories within stories' (13). Part two of 'Willie Ellin' echoes to some degree the fantasy elements of the juvenilia, but Brontë's sophisticated use of language and the complex artifice of her narrative structure proclaim an experienced author returning to old themes in order to renew and restructure them. If she had gone on to develop this spirit's 'voice' further she may even have initiated a new form of fictional narrative with the potential to challenge the conventions of realist fiction. However, it is also possible that the non-human narrator may have proved an unsustainable device for the story she wanted to tell. Even so, Brontë's willingness to test out a difficult new type of narrative voice tells us much about her confidence as an author following the publication of *Villette*.

Childhood, violence and pain

The third part of 'Willie Ellin', narrated in the third-person, is the most conventional aspect of the story in terms of its narrative style and is divided into two sub-sections. The first section opens with a deceptively calm domestic scene in what reads as a traditional starting point, resembling the 'once-upon-a-time' opening of folk tales and fairy stories. The housekeeper, called Mrs Widdup in part one, is now named 'Old Mrs Hill' and is described knitting while waiting for her tea:

> Old Mrs Hill, the solitary housekeeper of Ellin Balcony, was sitting one day in her kitchen reading a pamphlet-sermon as old as herself, when, just as her kettle began to

> simmer for tea, she thought she heard a noise like the jar of an iron gate opening from a bridle road which approached the lone house. She held her hand, checked her clicking needles and listened. Was it an arrival? (8)

Her unexpected visitor is 'a small wayfarer' who turns out to be Willie Ellin, a 'gentleman schoolboy' of ten years old whom she had cared for as a baby (9). He arrives 'footsore' and 'pale', having walked fifteen miles to escape bondage to his industrialist half-brother. The narrator explains that Willie's mother died when he was three years old, having suffered mistreatment at the hands of her 'cruel stepson' Edward (11). There is no mention of Willie's father, but it is clear that the child is an orphan and has replaced his mother as the target of Edward's violence. Willie is enslaved, an extreme variation on William Crimsworth reluctantly labouring for his brother in *The Professor*. As Willie explains to Mrs Hill, 'If he [Edward] thinks me slow in the business, which I find dry and hard enough to learn, he knocks my head about until it aches' (11). Indeed, Mrs Hill discovers that Willie is suffering from a head injury, violence being Edward's way of demeaning and controlling his small half-brother.

Edward plans, 'to bring [Willie] up as a beggar […] make [him] a shop apprentice', a role the child abhors; he complains, 'I don't want to live with shop boys, and stand behind a counter', his father, grandfather and great-grandfather having 'farmed their own land, and were squires […] We have never had traders in our family [until Edward] out of greediness went into business' (12–13). Mrs Hill points out to Willie that the Ellin family's prospects declined when the house and land were sold to pay off debts, forcing Edward to go into business (13). She urges the child to take up the work allotted to him, rather than brood on a mistaken sense of class privilege. Willie's Tory affinity to the land is juxtaposed with Mrs Hill's advocacy of the nobility of work, echoing the point suggested in the previous section that the spirit believes he originated in a labourer's dying heart because the man had unusual force and mental resilience which gave him a greater spiritual power.

Edward arrives in a carriage with a business colleague, Mr Bosas, and forces his way into Ellin Balcony to seek the runaway child. Edward resembles Heathcliff for both characters deny a vulnerable child his rights and both display a propensity to resort to domestic violence, the former 'held up a clenched fist in the old woman's face, [he] shook it between her two eyes, pronounced an oath, and dashed upstairs' (14). Edward is a 'great athlete' who swiftly finds Willie's hiding place and 'vigorously shook the slight door' behind which the child has barricaded himself against the 'terrible besieger' (14–15). Just as Heathcliff finds doors and windows no barriers in *Wuthering Heights*, so Edward swiftly breaks down the door to 'spr[i]ng upon his young brother. Down went the child before the onslaught', while the older man 'flourished the gig whip' over him (15). Willie, 'kneeling on the floor in his scant night-shirt', responds in a voice 'inexplicably quiet and steady' to say that he has now decided to work for Edward in the shop and asks that his whipping be '[n]ot too hard this time', an indication that the abuse has regularly been inflicted in the past. As Edward is about to administer the first blow, Bosas intervenes to say that Willie 'is not strong enough for the discipline of a gig whip' (15). Bosas, a Jewish merchant who trades with Edward, is a 'powerful' and 'handsome' man (15). As in her previous novels, Brontë resorts to the popular pseudo-science of phrenology to indicate character, the narrator explaining that 'No criminal ever displayed in a dock the countenance, bearing, feature and glance of Mr Bosas', whereas '[m]any a murderer has owned the light savage eye, the sensual traits, the strong jaw, massive neck, and full red whisker [sic] of Edward Ellin' (15). Edward is subdued by his colleague, claiming he did not intend to beat Willie, Bosas naively presuming that peace will now reign. Willie's face, however, displays the horror of his knowledge that the beating is only deferred: 'Fate sat in the air invisible at her cloudy wheel. She span on impassive, unravelling no knot in her wool. It was in vain that Willie turned sheet-white, and, for an instant, heart-sick. No man regarded, or could read what a lot the child foresaw' (16–17). Adult incomprehension of the child's situation appears to have

been a subject on Brontë's mind at this time, for in *Villette* she had depicted the child Paulina's complex emotions being dismissed as amusing by Graham Bretton, and when she began work on 'Emma' she also depicted a vulnerable child betrayed by her guardian.

The second section of part three continues with the third-person narrative form, opening with further information about Mr Bosas, who is 'English born, but […] a Hebrew in origin' (17). He is a man of 'superior wealth and commercial standing' who buys Edward's manufactured goods, causing the latter to 'treat[] him almost with subservience' (17). It is evident that Brontë intended to present a Jewish character in a favourable light, which indicates a new departure in her work, for she had previously been largely negative in her representations of people of other races or of any faith other than Christian Protestantism. While Bosas remains in Golpit, Willie is not punished, but as soon as his 'protector' (16) and 'advocate' (17) leaves, Willie receives from Edward a brutal punishment. On the night of Bosas's departure Willie is alone in his 'garret' room, a 'cold, narrow nest under the slates' situated in the servants' quarters, which 'contained but a crib and a stool' (17–18). The only respite in Willie's 'poor tossed life' (18) is the time he spends alone here reading; on this evening he consoles himself with *Robinson Crusoe*, a book also read by the child David in *David Copperfield* when he is banished to solitary confinement in his bedroom by his sadistic step-father Mr Murdstone (Dickens 105). Willie is imagining Crusoe's 'desolate island' when he hears Edward's approach and sees 'a shape six feet high, broad and rather corpulent' entering his room. This is the first time that Edward had 'visited thus in darkness and in secret', the narrator adding that it is not actually dark but an 'hour shared between two gleams – twilight and moonlight' (18). This suggests a link to part two, for the spirit-narrator has already emphasised his origin in 'the rim of twilight' and his affinity to the moon (6). While the spirit gains freedom at this juncture, Willie comes close to death (19). Edward's stealthy intrusion into the child's isolated

bedroom sexualises the inflicting of punishment and augments the disturbing qualities of the scene described in the next part of the story.

Part four focuses on the flogging that the child endures, made more severe by Willie explaining that if he is wounded Edward may 'be taken before a magistrate and [made to] pay a fine or be transported' (19). This comment so outrages Edward that he begins the whipping immediately: 'he liked his business, for he continued at its exercise what seemed like a long, a very long time', all the while Willie refuses to cry out (19). 'At last there came a gasp – the child sunk quite down – the man stopped' and the 'flogger seemed half-frightened' because Willie appears to have lost consciousness (19). However, the child quietly says, 'I cannot bear any more to-night' and Edward leaves (20). Brontë exploits the pathos of the situation to the full, describing the 'sad' sight of Willie 'creep[ing] painfully to his crib' and, after lying 'sleepless and suffering' for some time, beginning to cry: 'the sobs thickened, his little handkerchief was drawn from under his pillow – he wept into it freely' (20). Willie then prays, his mind 'withdraw[ing] into an unseen sphere' (20–1), an echo of the world inhabited by the transcendent spirit-narrator, but also corresponding to Brontë's own description in her *Roe Head Journal* of her out-of-body escape into Angria when she worked as a teacher (Alexander and Smith 436–7). Willie's escape into the spiritual realm is brief, for soon 'he returned to earth' (WE 21). This section of the story closes with a suggestion that the child has the ability to cross the barrier into the spirit-world, for in his suffering he is capable of 'penetrating prayers that […] pass unchallenged all gates and hosts and pierced at once within the veil' between life and the afterlife (21).

The final part of the fragment focuses on the corporeal, rather than the spiritual, moving back in time to the moment when Edward leaves his injured brother's room. A third-person narrator explains that the child 'had been severely flogged, and for a time felt sick' (21). Spiritual comfort is not available for God does not appear to watch over Willie at this moment:

> It might seem that the watchful care of God had temporarily been withdrawn from this orphan, as he shrank powerless to resist under a tyrannic hand – as he afterwards moaned alone, pale, faint, miserably though not passionately weeping, compelling himself, according to the bent of his idiosyncrasy, to a sort of heroic temperance of expression, even in extremity of grief. In man's judgment it might be deemed that this child was forgotten where even the fledgling dropped from the nest is remembered. William himself feared as much. There was a great darkness over his eyes, and a terrible ice chilled his hopes – his very hearing was suspended. (21)

At the end of part four, Willie's spiritual journey beyond the body brought 'composure' from God; in part five there is a rewinding of time and God's comfort is no longer available; however, a human comforter arrives in the form of an unnamed and 'blooming' 'girl of seventeen' (22). She embraces Willie, having heard the flogging from her 'room below', which suggests that she is not a servant living on the same attic floor as the child (22). This maternal 'young comforter' tells Willie that Edward 'shall never hurt you more, […] rocking the sufferer in her arms and cradling him on her breast', an action which causes him to weep 'fast and free' before falling asleep (22). This idealised female 'guardian' watches over the child as he sleeps, and when she leaves, she thinks 'of him through the night, to listen against molestation, and to be prepared at one menacing symptom to come out resolved to defend' (22). The identity of this 'young comforter' is not explained, for Brontë wrote no more of 'The Story of Willie Ellin'.

Conclusion

Many questions are raised by this intriguing fragment. Since her sisters' deaths, had Charlotte Brontë become aware of, and was she now inclined to embrace, a 'Brontë' legacy based on the literary depictions of the 'coarse' behaviour of tyrants? Had she decided to examine a 'social

problem', namely the subject of cruelty to children, at a time when the social problem novel was emerging as a significant new genre? Was she inspired by her visits to Newgate, Bedlam and the Foundling Hospital to represent vulnerable victims of injustice? Why did she refuse to drop the subject of a conflict between brothers, given that publishers had shown no interest in it? Why did she create the strange spirit-narrator who fails to conform to conventional notions of the ghostly? Were the five parts of 'Willie Ellin' each an attempt to start the same story? Or, more intriguingly, was Brontë planning to present identical events from different perspectives? Because of the paucity of evidence — all that exists is a six thousand-word manuscript written in pencil — these questions are impossible to answer definitively. Certainly, 'Willie Ellin' seems oddly out of keeping with the female autobiographical mode employed in both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the highly successful novels on which her reputation was (and is) based. 'Emma', the later fragment, presents a character called Mr Ellin, a bachelor who 'went where he liked, and, being a gossiping, leisurely person, he liked to go almost anywhere' (Brontë, 'Emma' 103). While it is possible that the appearance of Mr Ellin in 'Emma' might have allowed Brontë a way of linking her two stories, the idea of the beaten child Willie transforming into an adult gossipy man of leisure is not very likely. Clare Boylan, however, in her 2003 neo-Victorian novel, *Emma Brown*, completes Charlotte Brontë's 'Emma' and attempts to weave together the later school story and 'Willie Ellin'. Her Mr Ellin is a key figure in discovering the identity of the mysterious Emma Brown, and during the course of the plot he briefly remembers his childhood ordeal at the hands of his half-brother Edward (Boylan 235). However, as an adult he is both a gossipy man of leisure and a man harbouring secret pain from his past, and this renders him an unstable character in Boylan's fast-paced novel focusing on child prostitution. While Boylan draws on the 'Willie Ellin' fragment she avoids dealing with the more problematic gothic device of the spirit-narrator and tones down considerably the violence in Brontë's fragment.

I argue that 'Willie Ellin' is an extraordinary experiment undertaken by an author seeking a new direction for her fiction. There are suggestions in the story that Brontë wished to elevate the concept of work and workers, for the energy from the labourer's dying heart is presented as capable of bringing forth a spirit manifestation, while the housekeeper in part two is depicted as spiritual, unlike the superficial and wealthy inhabitants of Ellin Balcony. Willie's eventual decision to work in trade in part three of the fragment, along with Mrs Hill's advocacy of the ennobling aspects of labour, are certainly presented positively and there is a suggestion that his new understanding of the importance of self-sufficiency leads Willie to spiritual elevation in the form of his out-of-body experience. This gothic-inflected fragment also appears to call up the voices of the dead, as Brontë draws on her sisters' and brother's writings. 'Willie Ellin' marks a return to representing the child's perspective which she had explored so powerfully in *Jane Eyre*'s depictions of Jane in the Red Room and at Lowood, and in *Villette*'s motherless Paulina Home. More significantly, perhaps, Brontë abandons realism for part of the story, experimenting with the consciousness of a ghostly, non-human, nameless figure who emerges mysteriously from the troubled house called Ellin Balcony. McDayter has argued that gothic fantasy 'is not an "escape" from reality, but rather a constitutive operation which helps to shape what we have come to call "reality"' (73). The idea of a spirit inhabiting the same space as humans may have appealed to an author who had recently suffered three bereavements and wanted to represent the reality of her own desire to connect with the spirit-world. Whether we read 'The Story of Willie Ellin' biographically, as an aberration produced at a complex moment in Charlotte Brontë's life, or as the sign of an experienced author experimenting with new literary directions, it should be fully acknowledged as part of her oeuvre and read for the insights it reveals about her interest in developing new modes of narrative style.

Notes

[1] Some of the Angrian tales of child torture, such as Charlotte's 'The Enfant' and Branwell's 'Letters from an Englishman', depict the nefarious activities of Pigtail, a tavern keeper who, when he is not killing and torturing children, sells them to mill-owners (see Alexander *Edition* 34-36).

[2] An example of the sort of articles discussing the iniquities of child labour to which Brontë had access is the anonymous feature, 'National Economy No. 5: The Factory System – The Ten Hours Bill', *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 7, no. 40 (April 1833), pp. 377–92. The term 'Cottonopolis' was coined by J. Lowe in 'A Manchester Warehouse', *Household Words* (6 May 1854) pp. 268-272 (p. 269).

[3] Part One of 'The Story of Willie Ellin' is approximately 300 words; part two is approximately 1000 words; the two sections in part three total approximately 3,400 words, part four is approximately 600 words; and part five is approximately 450 words. The complete story is 5912 words in total.

[4] Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) employs a similar narrative strategy.

[5] While the narrator is not assigned a gender, I have used the pronoun 'he' because of Brontë's reference to the spirit possibly originating in a 'glow' from a male labourer's dying heart (Brontë: 7).

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